

## 7. Launching Loading Docs

### A reflection on the first year of a documentary innovation experiment from a producer/researcher perspective

**Abstract:** Loading Docs is a New Zealand documentary initiative that supports the development, production and distribution of three-minute documentary films. Loading Docs is also a development and innovation initiative, building the capabilities of local filmmakers to fund, promote and distribute their work and increase their presence online. More broadly, Loading Docs aims to create a supportive community of filmmakers, increase opportunities for feature documentary development, and cultivate audience awareness of and appetite for New Zealand documentaries. This paper presents an account of the development of Loading Docs from the author's perspective as co-founder, co-executive producer and practice-led researcher. Reflecting on the experience of acting as both researcher and producer in the capacity of an experimental initiative, this article argues that research/practice partnerships create beneficial opportunities for knowledge-transfer and innovation.

**Keywords:** documentary, innovation, New Zealand, practice-led research, Loading Docs

ANNA G. JACKSON

*Auckland University of Technology*

MY involvement with Loading Docs as co-executive producer was a direct consequence of my PhD research, *'Innovation and Change in Aotearoa New Zealand's documentary production ecology'* (Jackson, 2014). The initial provocation for this research project was my perception of a comparative lack of innovation in New Zealand's documentary production ecology (compared to other locations, particularly Australia). While striving to be objective in my analysis of the dynamics of New Zealand's documentary production ecology, and keeping an open mind about the value of innovation and the different forms innovation might take as appropriate to a specific environment, I also had a subjective interest in the development of documentary as a researcher, practitioner, audience member and citizen. In the course of my PhD candidature I became increasingly involved in organising events and collaborating on projects. Although I had initial reservations about the blurring of boundaries between research and practice and the positions of objective researcher and subjective participant and advocate, I came to see

practice-based research as a constructive approach to exploring the research problem I had identified (the lack of innovation in New Zealand's documentary production ecology). As a participant in the CCI Winter School at Queensland University of Technology in 2012, I had the opportunity to discuss my increasing level of participation in the New Zealand documentary production ecology and received strong support and encouragement for a practice-led approach to research. I was also challenged to consider initiatives such as Transmedia NZ and Loading Docs as 'innovation experiments' (Potts & Kastle, 2010).

A true innovation experiment would involve the application of a scientific experimental method to public sector innovation. I would need to create randomised controlled policy experiments to trial different approaches, thereby examining the mechanisms that support improvements in public sector innovation. If my involvement in Loading Docs was an innovation experiment, there was nothing controlled about it. The project was fuelled by instinct, determination, optimism and collaborative sweat. I did, however, learn enough from the experience of working as both producer and researcher to see the benefit of such an approach and aim to apply these learnings in future, integrating research aims and methodologies into project design and planning from the development stage. This article presents an account of the process of establishing an initiative designed to have impact in a media environment where opportunities for documentary makers to experiment and innovate were limited, and audiences had limited exposure to an increasingly narrow range of factual content. I propose that the participation of researchers in such initiatives—with the aim to expand and share knowledge—is highly beneficial to the wider media ecology, and I see great value in future practice-led research projects (ideally in partnership with public funders or industry) that would act as innovation experiments.

### **Loading Docs: Background and development**

I first met with producer Julia Parnell in 2010 to offer feedback on a proposal for an online platform for documentary shorts that she was developing for the NZ On Air Digital Content Partnership Fund. The concept for Loading Docs was an online platform for short form New Zealand documentaries that would give filmmakers an opportunity to make more creative documentaries, expand audiences for local documentary and develop the profiles of filmmakers. The proposal was unsuccessful that year, but after meeting again in 2011 Julia and I began to discuss the project further and decided to continue to develop the project and seek funding.

A key advancement came in 2012 when Julia Parnell discussed the Loading Docs concept with NZFC Short Film Manager Lisa Chatfield. Lisa was enthusiastic about the concept, but Loading Docs did not fit with the criteria for any of the NZFC's existing funds and the online aspect of the project in particular was beyond the Commission's scope. However, with Chatfield's encouragement in April 2012 we submitted a tender to the NZFC to executive produce Loading Docs as a Premiere Shorts Pod.

Premiere Shorts is one of two short film funding schemes that seek to identify and develop filmmaking talent through funds administered by Executive Producer groups (EPs). Filmmakers apply (usually as a team made up of a director, producer and writer) directly to EPs who select teams and develop film projects, overseeing the films throughout the production process. Our proposal was that the Loading Docs Premiere Shorts Pod would constitute the first stage in a three-stage cross-platform strategy. In keeping with NZFC objectives, this proposal offered a more traditional approach to distribution, with an emphasis on film festivals and DVD sales, but explored audience engagement at the funding and selection stages.

At Stage One, Loading Docs would function as a typical Premiere Shorts pod, supporting up and coming New Zealand directors to produce short documentaries. The aim for the Premiere Loading Docs shorts was acceptance into the world's top film festivals in order to gain international recognition and exposure. Stage Two would introduce an open call for proposals for 10 quality New Zealand documentary shorts. Loading Docs Eps would then consult with a high-profile curatorial team to select 20 finalists. The 20 shortlisted proposals would be presented online in a format similar to crowdfunding websites such as PledgeMe or Kickstarter for audiences to vote on the ten films that would be produced. Stage Three would see both the Premier Loading Docs and open call Loading Docs films premiere on television after a period blocked out for festival release. The films would then be available to purchase (download or stream) online or as a DVD release.

Our aim for the Loading Docs Premiere Pod was that it would be 'the start of the renaissance of New Zealand documentary, each phase of the project feeds into the next, creating audience interest, raising the profile of short form New Zealand documentary films, developing talent, and maximising overall investment' (Loading Docs, 2012). We did not have high expectations for the tender, but saw it as an opportunity to formally present Loading Docs to the NZFC and begin discussions regarding further opportunities. As anticipated, the Pod proposal was unsuccessful, but a dialogue with the NZFC had begun. In many ways the Premiere Shorts proposal was instrumental in shaping Loading Docs, as the emphasis on development (as well as production and distribution) became a core aspect of the initiative. The concept of using a platform similar to crowdfunding to allow the public to vote for films evolved in subsequent proposals into actual crowdfunding.

During the period in which we were trying to get funding for Loading Docs, our greatest challenge was that although everyone we pitched the concept to was enthusiastic about the project, it did not fit with existing NZFC, NZ On Air or Creative NZ funding criteria and was not sufficiently commercial to attract an investor. In 2012, NZ On Air launched the new Digital Media Fund, which replaced the Digital Content Partnership Fund, and for the first time Loading Docs fit the requirements of a fund, the Ignite fund, 'a fast turnaround small project fund to support digital initiatives for niche audiences or small scale projects and app development'. The only catch was that the funding for each

project in the Ignite Fund was capped at \$45,000 and so we dramatically cut down the scale and budget of the project.

Once again the funding proposal was unsuccessful, largely due to the unrealistically low budget, which had no provision for producer fees, very little staffing costs and a smaller budget allocated to each film. However, the manager of the Digital Media Fund, Brenda Leeuwenberg was otherwise supportive of the project. After further discussions with Lisa Chatfield we approached the head of the NZFC, Graeme Mason, with the proposal that Loading Docs be jointly supported by the NZFC and NZ On Air. This revised proposal placed greater emphasis on the value of the project in providing professional development both to the filmmakers (through the project itself and participation in a development and crowdfunding workshop) as well as for Julia and myself as producers in a largely unexplored field of film funding, production, distribution and marketing. Following further discussion between Leeuwenberg and representatives of the NZFC we were asked to address some questions regarding the Ignite proposal and present a more realistic budget. The aims for Loading Docs as a joint NZFC/NZ On Air initiative were; to create opportunities for New Zealand filmmakers to produce short documentaries that would not otherwise have been made and for audiences to see content they wouldn't otherwise have had the opportunity to see, to boost the local and international profiles of New Zealand documentary filmmakers, foster creativity and innovation and explore new online opportunities for filmmakers.

Discussions continued between all three parties (NZFC, NZ On Air and Loading Docs) well into 2013. During this time we also tried to establish a partnership with an international content syndicator that had established a successful international film initiative through brand-supported production and distribution. Our potential partner would almost certainly guarantee high profile international exposure, but at a cost that more than exceeded our entire project budget and so the partnership did not go ahead.

Finally, in June 2013 the NZFC committed \$61,000 to funding Loading Docs through a budget allocation for a Short Film Community Initiative, in addition to a commitment from NZ On Air of \$45,000. The funding decision was publicly announced in July 2013.

### **Outline of project development**

Having persisted with attempts to obtain funding for Loading Docs for a period of several years, we were eager to initiate the project as soon as possible once funding had finally been secured. Although the combined support of the NZFC and NZ On Air had made the project more feasible, we still had a very slim operating budget. Consequently, the timeframe for execution and delivery was tight, with a seven week development phase from September to mid-October 2013, a submissions phase from mid-October to mid-December and preparation time in January for a one-month crowdfunding campaign phase in February. Eight weeks were allocated for production from March to April, with May 2014 set as the target for the launch and distribution phase.

### **Phase One: Development (September—mid-October 2013)**

The seven-week development phase of *Loading Docs* began in September 2013, during which time we created a strategic plan for outreach, public relations and marketing, commissioned a brand and website design, developed sponsorship materials and engaged in industry outreach. This period was particularly important in terms of developing partnerships that would support the two-person production team of Julia Parnell and myself.

Outreach and publicity are essential to *Loading Docs*' success, as one of the most important aspects of the project is to promote New Zealand documentary filmmakers and to reach and cultivate a wider local and international audience for New Zealand documentary. Having some professional experience in public relations and film outreach was advantageous as I was able to develop a marketing, outreach and PR plan, manage social media accounts and write media releases without the expense of hiring an external consultant. However, we decided to contract Trigger Marketing and Publicity, a small local agency specialising in the entertainment field, to provide additional support such as offering feedback on strategy and media releases and handling the distribution of releases and subsequent media relations. Hiring a team with good working relationships with media and an understanding of the film industry in New Zealand would ensure our publicity efforts had greater impact. Trigger was supportive of the project and willing to work with our limited budget.

Finding a designer to create a visual identity for *Loading Docs* and create the website that would act as the project's online platform was an important task. We needed a logo for *Loading Docs* that would be distinctive and recognisable and convey a sense of professionalism, freshness and innovation. For our website we needed a look and feel that suggested a documentary film look and feel as well as a sense of 'New Zealandness'. Visually, we wanted to distinguish *Loading Docs* from low-budget filmmaker competitions and initiatives aimed at supporting young filmmakers in order to attract the interest of more established filmmakers, so aimed for an aesthetic with a sense of maturity. Relative to our budget, our needs for the site were demanding as we required changes to the site structure and content across the project's various phases and we wanted to provide each filmmaker with their own presence on the site. We spoke to several designers, but ultimately chose James Franklin and his company Assemble, which specialises in creating web-presences for filmmakers that can support self distribution options as well as promotion. As Assemble is a custom Content Management System (CMS) designed for filmmakers, content on the site can be easily updated with limited support from Assemble. Our initial plan was for each filmmaker to be able to manage their own microsite, which would have all of the standard features for a promotional film site such as an EPK, blog, links to social media, promotion for the crowdfunding campaign during that phase and finally, a branded embed of the 3-minute documentary that would integrate with social media and a mailing list. After trialling the self-managed system most filmmakers found

the task of managing web content too difficult and time-consuming and so the microsites were simplified, standardised and administered by Loading Docs following the crowd-funding phase of the project.

One of the long-term aims for Loading Docs is to achieve sustainability as an on-going initiative with little or no dependence on public funding. A primary commercial sponsorship would be one of the most desirable ways to secure financial support for the project, but such agreements usually take a long time to secure and require demonstrable business value to the sponsor, and so our energies in the first phase of Loading Docs were focused on getting the initiative off the ground. Partnerships on a smaller scale are also vital to ensuring the feasibility of the project, such as arrangements with equipment suppliers and post production facilities to provide filmmakers with assistance. These commercial arrangements also contribute to the creation of a production community in which filmmakers are able to develop and strengthen mutually beneficial relationships with industry service providers: an essential part of the economy of film production. Toybox and Sale St Studios agreed to provide post-production services (grading and sound mixing) at discounted rates and embraced the project with dedicated enthusiasm.

Media partnerships are also essential, particularly in the online environment where a media partner with significant reach can deliver content to a wide audience. Securing a relationship with *The New Zealand Herald* online during the development stage provided Loading Docs with a potential audience of approximately 835,000 readers a day ('NZ Herald readership on the rise,' 2013).

Outreach to local filmmakers, industry organisations and other community stakeholders was also a key focus of the development period, as support for and awareness of these projects within these groups would be crucial to ensure that Loading Docs attracted submissions from filmmakers of good calibre and that the aims of the project were aligned with filmmakers' interests. A documentary work-in-progress event for DOC2DOC, facilitated by The Screen Directors Guild (SDGNZ) in late September 2013, provided an opportunity to present Loading Docs to a community of filmmakers for the first time and the project was very well received. Wanting to ensure that our community outreach efforts were not limited to Auckland, we sought an opportunity to present to filmmakers in Wellington and Women in Film and Television (WIFT) NZ provided us with a short slot at an NZFC-hosted lunchtime event in October 2013, where again the response to Loading Docs was overwhelmingly positive.

### **Phase Two: Submissions (Mid-October—December 2013)**

A call for proposals was issued on 21 October 2013 and promoted through industry networks and the circulation of a media release. At the same time, the Loading Docs website ([www.loadingdocs.net](http://www.loadingdocs.net)) was made public and social media accounts on Twitter and Facebook were activated. A Loading Docs branded channel featuring curated three minute documentary content was launched on Vimeo (where the films would ultimately

be hosted) to provide inspiration for filmmakers and to demonstrate the possibilities of the three minute format for online documentary. A promotional video was released a week later to support the call for proposals, which significantly boosted the number of shares the call for proposals received via social media. The video was also a means of demonstrating that we, as producers, were willing to personally front an outreach campaign in the same way that Loading Docs filmmakers would during their crowdfunding campaigns. By the deadline for submissions on November 25, 67 proposals had been received. Given that Loading Docs was an entirely new initiative with no similar precedent and the requirements for filmmakers were very specific—such as the expectation to participate in a two-day workshop in January 2014, commitment to a one-month crowdfunding campaign and delivery by mid-April, a small production budget and a set theme—the response was a gratifying indication of the level of interest from filmmakers in the aims of Loading Docs as a project. Filmmakers were required to submit a production plan, synopsis, treatment and identify potential audiences and communities of interest. Many of the submissions received were highly detailed and thorough, and from filmmakers with significant experience. In selecting the ten films, we looked for concepts that showed creativity and originality that could also convey a story or central message in a three-minute format. While each film needed to stand alone, we also considered how the films would complement each other as a group, looking also for diversity in style, theme and representation.

Having submitted many project proposals myself during the period of my PhD research, and having given much thought to funding policies and selection criteria, the opportunity to be on the other side of the selection process provided me with great insight into the challenging role of funders or commissioners. Julia Parnell and myself made an initial shortlist of fifteen films, which was then presented to our advisory team (Amie Mills, James Franklin, David White and Karl Sheridan) and to representatives from NZ On Air and the NZFC. With a short period for development and production many good submissions were rejected because our tight deadline for the delivery. Projects that were heavily reliant on access to people or places that had not yet been fully secured at the time of submission or had a narrative heavily contingent on events that could not be controlled or, most commonly, where the film treatment needed further development or detail, were generally excluded.

As much of the future survival of Loading Docs depended on the success of the initial round of projects, we also gave a good deal of consideration to the experience of each film's production team, and for this reason some very interesting proposals from young filmmakers were rejected as we lacked the resources to provide them with sufficient support as producers. However, a few less experienced filmmakers were selected, given additional support from Julia Parnell and filmmaker David White, and paired with seasoned DOPs and editors. The final ten films selected represent a range of subjects that all, in some way, related to the theme of home. The theme provided a unified focus for the

films but was sufficiently broad for filmmakers to interpret the theme in unique ways. We aimed to select films that together comprise a diverse range of styles and subject matter. The completed films can be viewed here: <http://loadingdocs.net/2014films/>

### **Phase Three: Pre-production and crowdfunding (January—February 2014)**

A two-day workshop for Loading Docs filmmakers was held in mid-January 2014 during which filmmakers honed their crowdfunding pitches and campaign strategies, spent time with Loading Docs producers and advisors, worked on production plans and treatments, and contributed to outreach and distribution planning. In February, the filmmakers were introduced to their Loading Docs microsites.

PledgeMe was chosen as the platform for the crowdfunding campaign. We chose PledgeMe because it was a New Zealand business with an established presence in New Zealand and a team that was willing and able to provide our filmmakers with direct support. PledgeMe founder Anna Guenther attended the workshop herself and gave the filmmakers advice on how to run a successful campaign and offered feedback on their crowdfunding pitches. PledgeMe's ongoing support throughout the filmmakers' campaigns was invaluable.

Crowdfunding campaigns launched on PledgeMe on February 1, 2014, and ran until March 4 (a thirty day campaign period). Each film team was tasked with raising \$2,000 through crowdfunding, which would then be matched with \$2,500 from Loading Docs, in addition to a post-production package. Although the crowdfunding campaign allowed the modest operational budget for Loading Docs to stretch further, the main driver for requiring filmmakers to crowdfund was that it provided filmmakers with excellent training in marketing and outreach. The crowdfunding campaigns generated publicity for each film but also for the initiative as a whole ahead of our launch. It created a community of supporters who were literally 'invested' in the project. The campaigns were all successful, with many films exceeded their target, helped by promotion on the *New Zealand Herald* website. The crowdfunding campaigns for Loading Docs 2014 can be seen at [www.pledgeme.co.nz/collabs/14](http://www.pledgeme.co.nz/collabs/14).

### **Phase Four: Production (March—May 2014)**

While some filmmakers had begun production during the crowdfunding phase in February, March and April were earmarked for production, with delivery to Toybox and Sales Street expected in early May. In addition to supporting filmmakers during production and giving feedback on first cuts, we were busy during this period preparing for the launch of the films in May. This meant finding a venue, organising a launch event, liaising with our media partners, organising publicity for the launch and preparing outreach plans and materials.

### **Phase Five: Launch and distribution**

Loading Docs 2014 launched with a premiere screening at the Academy Cinemas in



Auckland. The launch was attended by the filmmakers, media, our supporters and a small number of paying guests. The event was covered by our media partner *The New Zealand Herald*, and all films were subsequently available to view and share on the Loading Docs website and *The NZ Herald* website. Radio New Zealand's website *The Wireless* also featured all the films (accompanied by interviews with the filmmakers). The films were made available to share and embed via Vimeo, and audiences were encouraged to do so.

Part of the funding received from the NZFC was allocated to the provision of a workshop with an international guest to support Loading Docs filmmakers' development. Coinciding with the launch, we hosted a workshop with Vimeo curator (and *Short of the Week* founder) Jason Sondhi, who ran a masterclass on online distribution and promotion.

The films were widely covered in the media, receiving exposure in a range of publications, on radio stations such as Radio NZ, Newstalk ZB, Radio Live and Kiwi FM. Films screened on current affairs television series *20/20*, *3 News*, *Seven Sharp* and *Te Kaea* and on the Rialto Channel. Two films (*The Jump* and *Living Like Kings*) were selected as Vimeo Staff Picks and featured on high profile short film website *Short of the Week*, which helped to boost international views for the films. This exposure, in addition to our outreach efforts, meant that a number of prominent international sites embedded the films. The films have enjoyed a long-tail of distribution, going on to screen in festivals in New Zealand and around the world, and on Air New Zealand's inflight entertainment. They have also continued to circulate widely online.

Not everything went smoothly during the launch of the first round of Loading Docs. Despite our cautious approach to vetting submissions, one of the films initially selected for the initiative—a film about a recently re-discovered native bird thought to have been extinct—withdrawed prior to crowdfunding due to access issues. Its replacement—a film about serial cat-killings in the seaside town of Raglan—was completed, but withdrawn within days of its release due to threat of legal action.<sup>1</sup> Crowdfunding was a successful element of the initiative overall, but the need to create and deliver rewards added time and, in some cases, a financial cost to the process. Failure to deliver on the rewards could also impact on the reputation/perception of the initiative as a whole, so added an element of risk. Resources were stretched to the limit during the first year of Loading Docs. I supplemented my income with teaching work, and Notable Pictures (Julia Parnell's production company) provided much needed additional staffing resources during the crowdfunding and production phases of the project.

On the whole, however, the first year of the initiative was a remarkable success, reaching audiences across multiple platforms locally and internationally to critical acclaim. NZ On Air and NZFC provided further funding for another round of ten films, which launched in July 2015 online (via Vimeo) and on national broadcaster TVNZ's OnDemand service. Five of the ten films then premiered at the prestigious New Zealand International Film Festival. As with 2014's films, publicity and circulation has continued

long after the initial launch, and awareness of the initiative is widening, both locally and internationally.

## **Conclusion**

While Loading Docs has been a fulfilling realisation of many ideas that gestated during the period of this research project, all of the creative projects I have been involved with during this time have contributed greatly to my understanding of innovation as a process and as a value that drives creative effort. My involvement with Transmedia NZ has also enhanced my appreciation of the important role of community and networking in a creative ecology. Through my interactions with producers, funders, supporters and observers—with participants of all kinds—I have observed the many small but meaningful ways that systems and practices are responsive to, and productive of, change and innovation. A chance meeting, a single conversation, an introduction, can spark action that develops into something new: the birth of a creative relationship, a shift in thinking, an expansion of knowledge. This perspective on the social dynamics of the production ecology of documentary reflects Kerrigan and McIntyre's observation that the documentary filmmaker's practice is shaped by the structures, products, processes and contexts of production and distribution, and that their actions 'take place in social and cultural environments that have profound effects on the work itself' (Kerrigan & McIntyre, 2010, p. 126).

I have found much value in McIntyre and Kerrigan's work on practice-led research drawing on Csikszentmihaly's systems model of creativity (Kerrigan, 2013; McIntyre, 2001; Kerrigan & McIntyre, 2010). It offers a critical approach to the examination of creative practice within a systems model that is akin to ecology, which examines internal and external creative forces. Jon Dovey has similarly argued that producer/researchers should embrace 'creative risk, experiment and networked collaboration', thereby contributing to media knowledge in significant and meaningful ways (Dovey, 2008, p. 255).

My role and aims as a researcher motivated me to be involved in projects that explored new forms of documentary innovation in the context of New Zealand's documentary production ecology and facilitated a degree of creative risk-taking and experimentation that I may not have pursued otherwise. In this sense I see great value in the role of participant researcher/practitioner in the generation, support, and critical reflection of creative practice. My experience of collaborating with documentary makers and other creative practitioners, working through development and funding processes and embarking on the production of a publicly funded project has greatly enriched my understanding of the dynamics of the documentary production ecology. I hope to build on this experience in future by taking an 'innovation experiment' approach to future research/production partnerships. As Loading Docs continues to develop and grow, I also hope to revisit this project as a researcher to examine the value of the initiative's contribution to New Zealand's documentary (and wider media) ecology.

**Note**

1. Loading Docs issued the following statement and released a video apology recorded by the filmmakers, but the complainants demanded that the film be removed from circulation. We simply did not have the resources to fight should the case go to court.

We have made the decision to remove *Catkiller* from circulation after it came to light that the film may be perceived as depicting a location in Raglan as the residence of the alleged Catkiller. Sequences of the film shot on location were intended as a staged dramatic reenactment, and no association with the residents of the street was intended. To avoid any further embarrassment or distress to the residents of the street concerned we have withdrawn the film and wish to issue the following retraction/apology:

‘The documentary *Catkiller* depicts Earles Place Raglan as being connected with a serial Catkiller who resides in Raglan. We wish to clarify that Earles Place has no such connection and in no way are we suggesting that the alleged catkiller resides in Earles Place. We have been in communication with the police, who confirm that the people of possible interest live in a different location. We express our sincere apologies for any embarrassment and distress that may have been caused to the residents of Earles Place.’ (Loading Docs, 2014)

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*Anna Jackson is a creative producer and lecturer at Colab (AUT) working in the areas of transmedia production and documentary innovation. Anna’s professional experience spans a range of creative industries including theatre, film, documentary and transmedia production. She is the co-director of Transmedia NZ and an executive producer of the online documentary initiative, Loading Docs. [anna.jackson@aut.ac.nz](mailto:anna.jackson@aut.ac.nz)*